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Dear Friends,

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God Those words, from Isaiah 40:3 (KJV), with which I concluded last month's letter, serve as something of an anthem for the season of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas.

These four weeks are a time to prepare ye the way of the Lord, to make straight in the desert a highway for our God. What if where you are now, however you wish to understand it, has some elements of a wilderness? And what if, rather than ignoring or denying that wilderness aspect of our lives, or feeling sorry for ourselves, or seeking distraction in ever more frenetic activity—what if we were to set about preparing the way of the Lord wherever we are, making straight in our own particular desert something like a highway for our God?

It is worth noting that at the first Christmas, God does not come to where things are perfect, but to a stable. Where Jesus appears in itself might tell us something about how to prepare for the Lord and what sort of place God seeks as a point of arrival.

The wilderness is difficult, but maybe not bad The wilderness may be where we are, but it is not where we are to remain—it is not to be our home. The Holy Family do not set up housekeeping in the stable, and the wilderness is a place, a time, a season of our lives, through which we pass.

In the Book of Exodus, the wilderness was in many ways a very rich place: Israel learned a lot about themselves individually and as a people in the wilderness. In the wilderness they shook off the effects of having been enslaved in Egypt. They learned how to organize their social and political life, they learned who God is and what God requires, and they learned, through first-hand experience, the high cost of imagining that God could be thought of as a projection of their own ideas and desires, as high minded and "religious" as those ideas might be. They make straight in the desert a highway for God, but it is a path of understanding, not some physical structure. They go into the wilderness as slaves following Moses, one step ahead of death at the hands of Pharaoh's army; they come out, when they cross the River Jordan, as the people of God, at last prepared to enter the Land of Promise, and ready to fight their own battles.

Wasn't this supposed to be about Christmas? So why all this talk about the Old Testament? My sense is that for most of us, and certainly for most of our culture, the meaning of Christmas has continued to elude us. We are still in the wilderness.

As far as I can tell from the stories, God did not come to us in the person of Jesus so pagans would practice greater generosity to their family, friends, associates, and a few charities. While it is tempting to identify “giving” as the spirit of Christmas, I think the stories suggest an agenda with significantly greater scope. God does not come because we are basically doing just fine and there are a few details which need a little tweaking. God comes because we have made a hash of things and God is giving us another chance to get it right.

And we have become so used to our way of doing things, and their dysfunctional result, that we find it difficult to imagine any other way of living. Christmas may offer us all a gift, but we are interestingly reluctant to unwrap it and put it to use.

When Jesus comes, he says, What if the peace you want comes from being better at loving your enemies instead of trying so hard to kill them? He asks, What sort of society might we have if we were to view everyone as if they were members of the royal family of God? And, perhaps most challengingly, What if we were to view earthly material life certainly as real and important, but not as ultimate and absolute? These are the challenging, troubling messages, the actual gifts, of Christmas.

And we're getting to Christmas....when? So why are we talking about war, peace, politics, and death at Christmas? Consider the angels. Of all the things the angels might have said to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem, what was their message? “Glory to God in the highest, and **on earth, peace, good will towards men**” (Luke 2:14 KJV). And a few verses later, Simeon, standing in the temple, holds the infant Jesus and declares that the child is the salvation which God has prepared for **all people**, and, by being a new light **for the nations** would thereby also glorify the people of Israel. (Luke 2:27-32). And more than that, Simeon asks God to bring him to the next phase of his life—“I'm ready for what comes next,” Simeon says: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.”

It seems to me that nations—and, for that matter, people—largely continue to relate to one another as they did before the birth of Jesus. Power politics in the twenty-first century do not seem so very different from the way Rome governed its empire when a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that all the world was to be taxed.

While we delight in singing about peace and good will, committing ourselves to the plan Jesus offers to achieve these goals produces—understandably—significantly more concern and resistance. We are so accustomed to the old way of doing things: kill your enemies, let someone else deal with poverty, what is physical is what is real; biological life is the ultimate goal and its loss is the ultimate defeat and failure. Like Israel in the wilderness, when challenged by the change salvation would require, we are tempted to look back and think that maybe the old life wasn't—isn't—really all that bad. So rather than look at the real, and disturbing, content of Christmas, we focus instead on celebration, on family, and on giving—things that we understand. “Happy Holidays” offends no one, perhaps because it lacks any of the challenge which speaking of Jesus and Christmas will inevitably evoke. And if the benefits of that conversation seem uncertain or unclear to us, we opt to preserve our stability rather than to consider that stable in Bethlehem.

One of the ironies of this season is that God goes to some lengths to try to offer us a better life, and we cling with steadfast determination to the old.

The reordering of a flawed and broken world by the Godly transformation of hearts and minds compares favorably to a modest seasonal spike in charitable giving as a cause for celebration. I like fireplaces, snowmen, and roasting chestnuts as much as the next person, but I have modest expectations about their ability to fix what is most broken in the world. Christmas properly understood offers much more to celebrate, but is, at the same time, a much scarier proposition than just trying harder to be on our best behavior for a few days.

Christmas in the Wilderness The wilderness, the place of disorientation, distress, and deprivation, is exactly the setting in which we are most able, and most inclined, to prepare the way of the Lord. The upside of hitting bottom—if you survive the crash—is that it prompts a certain skepticism about the decisions and values which put you into a tailspin in the first place. And in the wilderness of disappointment, disorientation, unhappiness, or growing anxiety, making a highway—not just a path, but a highway—for our God reemerges as a plausible alternative to self-made dysfunction. Most of us only make a highway for God when everything else we have tried has not worked out. My theory is that God cares more about our eventually figuring things out than about how long it takes us. We all come to this later than we should, so don't think you will be the only one who arrives with some scars and bruises.

You will note that in the wilderness we do not just “look” for the Lord as if we had no hand in his coming, nor do we “summon” the Lord as if he were at our beck and call. There is work for us to do: we prepare, and we wait.

OK, I get it, but prepare how? Suppose you have agreed to host an exchange student from Germany or France for part of the holidays. I suspect you would brush up on your German or French or try to master a few basic phrases. You might research their holiday customs so you could offer them something familiar. Perhaps you would see if you could set up a Skype session for them to be in touch with family and friends back home. You would prepare a room. But before you did all of those specific things, somewhere in your heart and mind you would have first committed to wanting to welcome your guest and wanting to welcome him or her well.

Preparing for God is not so different. Indeed, let every heart prepare him room. I have come to realize that my telling people how to deepen their relationship with God elicits not so much interest as resistance until people are actually ready. If encountering and growing closer to God is not a priority for you, there are scores of plausible, respectable sounding, reasonable reasons why you cannot make time right now. Similarly, my experience is that people who genuinely want to deepen their relationship with God are more likely to tell me how they have done it than to ask me to show them the way. Clergy may have a hand in preparing the way, but our role does not seem to give us the ability to do this work on your behalf. A tee-shirt I recently saw puts it this way: “I can explain it for you, but I can't understand it for you.”

A Children's Carol Phillips Brooks wrote in the central verse of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” (which he composed for his parish children's Christmas Pageant) “where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.” Perhaps whatever it takes to cultivate meekness in your soul might be an aid to your being transformed so that God becomes for you real, immediate, and personally present. Brooks goes on in the next verse to give his own view of how to prepare to welcome God:

Where children pure and happy pray to the blessed Child,
where misery cries out to thee, Son of the mother mild;
where charity stands watching, and faith holds wide the door,
the dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once

more.

How to prepare? Be in conversation with God, which is my working definition of prayer. I suspect that being “pure and happy” may be more of a result of those regular conversations than preconditions for them. Bring before God what makes you unhappy, distressed, or even outright miserable.

Practice charity—and while the donation of money or things is certainly an element of charity, let yours go deeper than that. In Advent, cultivate a charity of the heart—work to think the best of people, especially people of whom you tend to think the worst. Practice a charity of speech—be generous in giving thanks, appreciation, and praise. Practice a charity of action—become an honorary Scout this season and do a good turn daily—just one a day is a fairly modest goal—and see if you can improve on that as the season progresses. Watch for chances to practice charity and imagine that these opportunities are gifts to you.

And believe that preparing a highway in the wilderness will make for a better life—let faith hold wide the door. “Faith” here does not mean assent to abstract propositions about the nature of God; it means simply the belief that walking with, or behind, God [“in his Master’s steps he trod” we will sing near the end of the Advent Concert on December 15] will bring us to a better life than will wandering off on our own. Try substituting the word “confidence” for “faith” and see where that takes you. How might you increase your confidence in God this season?

When we in this way prepare in the wilderness a highway for our God, Christmas becomes not only a story from long ago, but an experience here and now. By practicing these virtues we begin to live into the manner of life which Jesus came to offer. Perhaps the more we act like Jesus, the more sense Jesus makes to us.

Celebration and Experience... Much of the world celebrates Christmas, but few actually experience it. Celebration is the *response* to Christmas; celebration is not the essence of Christmas. My sense is that most people celebrate Christmas out of custom and a desire to celebrate (think of the growing number of alternative celebrations). Perhaps some of the sadness which is never very far beneath the surface of the season derives from the fact that celebrating just to celebrate offers temporary distraction but little lasting joy, and consequently leaves us with something like an emotional hangover.

We are all insightful enough to realize that seeking salvation in the act of celebrating will always leave us disappointed. And if we think that celebration is what Christmas and the Christian faith have to offer, then no wonder so many dismiss it as shallow, inadequate, and unworthy of thoughtful sophisticated people. The irony is what those who deny Christmas may be rejecting is not the real Christmas at all. And I suspect what they most desire—peace, justice, and fellowship among all peoples is actually at the heart of the event they scorn.

The message of Christmas is that God wants our lives, and the life of the world, to be better. We have shown little ability to accomplish that goal, so God takes it upon himself to come to us to show the way and to provide those aspects of the project which we cannot provide ourselves. In the first instance God is a Lord, and in the second, a Savior.

Our faith, or confidence, is that following God, whom we see most clearly in Jesus, can actually change the world in a way that we desire but have not been able to do on our own. To continue to try to re-make our lives, or the world, on our own is to continue to live in the pre-Christmas world.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* C. S. Lewis sums up the dysfunction of Narnia by describing it as a place where it is always winter but never Christmas. If in our wilderness we can make a

highway for our God, perhaps we might find the dark night waking, the glory breaking, and Christmas coming, not long ago and far away, but into our lives today. And when we recognize, and experience, the enormity of that gift, perhaps we might find a cause for lasting, transformative celebration deeper and longer lasting than what we see generally abroad.

Let me finish with Brooks's final stanza of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and I invite you to take it and make it your prayer this season:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

In our wilderness let us prepare the way, and then may our prayer be God will come to us there and work in us a transformation which will be a cause for heart-felt and lasting celebration.

May the rich and transforming blessing of knowing God in this holy season be yours and extend to those you love, now and always.

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